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ABSTRACT

This report describes research undertaken to understand the operation of Green Hills Farm Project (GHFP), an example of a new model of locally organized, place-based farmer network organizations. The report, based primarily on open-ended interviews conducted with the group's 11 core members, documents the role of the University of Missouri in the group's activities and explores how the university can support the growth of similar networks. The first section provides a general overview of the GHFP, describing the project, its activities, and its financing. The next discusses the central processes and core dynamics of the group its goals, diversity of ideas, innovation, multiple networking, sharing, the link to the university research center, positive outlook regarding farming, consensus building, common respect and trust, and philosophy of agriculture, life, and family. The last section suggests ways in which the University of Missouri can facilitate these types of farm groups. Recommendations include: (1) identification of potential clusters of farmers and enhancement of newly formed networks; (2) involvement of university research facilities and researchers; (3) enhancing farmer network use of external networks; (4) providing seed monies for groups; (5) publicizing success stories; and (6) providing support through curriculum and training. (JLS)

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New Farmer Network Groups and the University

A Case Study of Missouri's Green Hills Farm Project

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Executive Summary

Principal Investigators
J. Sanford Rikoon
William Heffernan
Jere Gilles

Report Prepared By
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SR504

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January 1997

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Introduction

In the past decade, innovative locally organized, place-based farmer network organizations have been established in the United States and other countries. These groups represent a new model of farm organization in their emphasis on a horizontal organizational structure and a lateral learning process. Group members take responsibility for analyzing their local farming situation and for modifying farming practices to better protect the environment, increase economic viability and improve quality of life. The Green Hills Farm Project (GHFP) is one example of this new model of farm organization that has operated with considerable success in Missouri.

Organizations like the GHFP provide new challenges and opportunities for land-grant universities. The University of Missouri requested this study of the Green Hills Farm Project to be conducted by the Department of Rural Sociology. The goals of this research are twofold: First, to understand how GHFP operates, including its most notable characteristics and strategies; and, second, to document the roles of the University in the group's activities and to explore how the University might pave the way for growth of similar networks in other parts of the state.

This report is based primarily upon open-ended interviews conducted with the group's eleven core families. These core families are the most active members of the group and function as the heart of the GHFP's unique network. The report is divided into three sections. Section one provides a general overview of the Green Hills Farm Project. Section two discusses several of the most important components of the group's workings and mechanisms. The last section suggests ways for the University to facilitate these types of locally generated farm groups.

Section I

What is the Green Hills Farm Project?

The GHFP is comprised of approximately 100 dues-paying members. It began with a small group of farming families in northern Missouri who banded together in order to ensure their survival on the farm, to maintain and improve the ecological viability of their land, and to enhance their overall quality of life.

These families had all made the decision to reorganize their farming operations on a model of forage-beef production using the principles of intensive rotational grazing (IRG) — a philosophy and system of grazing in which animals harvest forage on sub-divided permanent pasture for most of the year. This decision to change farming practices was pivotal to the formation of the group. In order to farm according to IRG principles and at the same time avoid having to "recreate the wheel" on each farm, the families began to meet in 1988 to share their knowledge.

Unlike most modern farm organizations, the GHFP group organized into a horizontally linked network in which the families strive to learn from each other. Typically, farm organizations rely on a top-down model of technology and information diffusion and depend on the leadership and knowledge of university experts and farm professionals.

The lateral learning process of the GHFP, however, does not preclude meaningful information and knowledge exchange with the University. MU's Forage Systems Research Center, in fact, plays an important role in the dynamics of the GHFP. The strong horizontal exchange of information between the FSRC and the GHFP creates an equitable, productive relationship and an atmosphere in which members feel they have the knowledge and power to solve their own problems.

Activities

The GHFP represents a different kind of organization through the unique ways members perceive, evaluate and use information. While GHFP members remain interested in conventional models of agricultural research and extension that emphasize top-down transfer of information, they are also interested in alternative resources. In fact, their primary information sources are other farmers and MU forage researchers.

GHFP farmwalks, seminars and self-taught education workshops are emblematic of the group's emphasis on firsthand learning. Farmwalk events rotate between different members' farms on a monthly basis with twelve to fourteen families usually in attendance. The hosts lead a tour of their farm, which in turn provides the framework for discussions of issues faced by different members. The farmwalk is always followed by a "potluck" meal in the home of the hosts.

Topics for seminars and educational courses are selected on the basis of member's interests. One of the most popular courses has been the "Ranching for Profit" course based on the work of Stan Parsons.

Financing

It is not clear to what extent a group like the GHFP needs income or money to operate, however, the GHFP has developed two strategies for generating incon.e — annual membership fees ($20 per year for all members), and grant/project money from funding sources.

Income from membership fees, which began in 1994, totals $2,000. GHFP's primary external funding source to date has been from the Kansas Rural Center/Heartland Network, which has provided $42,000 over a three-year period to fund activities and compensate members for administrative tasks.

The GHFP has also received limited financial support from other sources. For example, in 1992 and 1993 the group was incorporated as a subcontractor on two USDA/SARE grants administered by the Forage Systems Research Center. These $5,000 project funds were earmarked for group seminars, outreach and education pertaining to IRG.

Section II

Central Processes and Dynamics of the GHFP

All core members of the GHFP regard the group as successful and beneficial to them financially and socially. This section discusses the core dynamics essential to GHFP's success.

Goals

GHFP members emphasize the importance of working towards specific personal goals. These goals, or "visions" as defined by some, revolve around reducing input costs, increasing farm profit, caretaking the environment, remaining on the farm, and maintaining overall sustainability. The particular objectives of each member are not identical, nor is there a single category of goals. Rather, the group's goals represent a mix of social, economic and environmental objectives. People within the group have specific goals that are slightly different, therefore, their individual strategies vary.

The organizing influence in this diversity is a set of commonly respected values. These values revolve around a complex mix of issues including quality of life, environmental awareness, and a commitment to retaining small- and medium-sized family farms in the countryside. The three-part goals of Holistic Resource Management (economic, social, ecological) cited by most members serve as a kind of shorthand for the group's common value statement.

Diversity

At a fundamental level, diversity within the group is crucial. All group members speak of the importance of having farmers with a variety of different ideas willing to share their insights at GHFP functions. The resulting "why didn't I think of that" sentiment is a common response to informal information exchanges. Different ideas and the willingness of group members to listen to them reflect the high value group members place on experimentation and innovation.

Through a process of supporting and helping one another to meet individual goals, even those not necessarily shared by the whole group, the diversity within the GHFP functions as an important social "glue." This diversity is also represented in terms of differing farm styles, livestock, personalities, philosophies and scales of operation. The abundant diversity within the group, however, is bounded by member consensus on some basic issues, including philosophy of agriculture and family and a rejection of an exclusivity that undermines creativity and innovation.

Innovation

In a sense, GHFP was created out of the process of adapting new grazing technology and systems. It is this continued willingness to try new things, especially those promising to cut costs and increase farm income, that undergirds much of the innovation that occurs within the GHFP. Members frequently mention the technical innovations they've made after talking to one another at meetings and going on farmwalks. Members discuss and exchange such everyday working knowledge as how to rig water systems so the water will not freeze, how to fence and size paddocks, and how to get cattle to eat certain grasses at certain times. In a more general sense, these information exchanges help members understand "why people do what they do." Now that they have begun to master a grass-based farming system, members have started looking at enhancing profits through different marketing innovations.

Multiple Networking

GHFP reliance on a predominately horizontal exchange of knowledge and mutual support among members has extended and strengthened the strong self-help philosophy of the group. This distinctive characteristic is revealed in both internal and external network links. The internal networks are manifested in farmwalks, seminars, and informal relationships between members.

In terms of structure, this type of horizontally organized, place-based group is different from most agriculture organizations, which tend to be centralized, vertically organized and trans-place. Emphasizing that "seeing is believing," especially regard-

ing technology that is new or different, most members cite the importance of group and hands-on learning provided by the GHFP network. Thus, new information and ideas, whether from internal or external sources, are shared, tested and discussed among members before they are widely adopted. It is through this process that external, outside knowledge becomes internal, inside knowledge.

All GHFP members are aware that what they are doing is different from what most of their neighbors are doing. Thus the more people that are involved in a group like the GHFP, the less ostracized each individual in the group feels and the more persuasive and credible the group's ideas seem to others and to themselves.

Communication and working relationships with other grazing networks, technical specialists, non-profit organizations and some university and extension offices constitute the GHFP's external network. Through the external network, members gain access to beneficial information developed in other contexts. In this way, external networking provides a primary medium for communicating innovative ideas and new technology to the group. It also encourages participation in educational demonstrations, workshops and seminars with other groups and agencies interested in a variety of related rural issues.

SHARING

GHFP members emphasize the importance of "sharing." This communicative process involves a give-and-take of ideas regarding farm operations as well as the actual sharing of personal time in GHFP activities. Importantly, members do not feel that they have either a proprietary ownership of knowledge or that innovation or creativity can fully develop on an individual basis. They recognize that new ideas and practices may originate with an individual, but they are reworked and made better through group participation. This commitment to sharing is evident both in activities such as farmwalks and seminars where ideas and information can be exchanged and in diverse cooperative work projects undertaken by the group.

The GHFP notion of sharing goes beyond the two-way exchange of time and ideas and becomes more personal. This personal sharing is important to the members' vision of quality of life and what they feel needs to be added to their community. In the words of one member, the social aspect of the GHFP as expressed in sharing and group work is like the "fellowship of church." Importantly, the Green Hills emphasis on sharing and reciprocity is not a contractual or formal exchange, but one that occurs informally over time and in a variety of settings.

Forage Systems Research Center (FSRC)

The FSRC is an off-campus research center within the Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station. It is representative of research institutions that are beginning to adopt new and different research goals in agriculture and to adopt research agendas that involve local producers in the entire research process (participatory research). Importantly, the two lead researchers at the FSRC are also farmers and active members of the GHFP.

GHFP members see the FSRC and its link to the University as beneficial. Several members cited the Forage Center as being the means by which they were introduced to the group. The FSRC's prominent grazing school has been especially important in this regard.

The FSRC adds legitimacy to the group's activities, creates useful research and provides networking assistance. The fact that many of the innovative grazing practices of the group members are also being researched by the Forage Center is a source of pride to members and lends respectability to their on-farm practices.

GHFP members cite the FSRC's USDA research grants related to planned grazing systems for sustainable livestock productions and pasture finished beef as examples of research responsive to their needs. Members are also involved in this type of research through on-farm demonstrations and, increasingly, on-farm studies conducted by University researchers on GHFP farms. Finally, the GHFP/FSRC partnership helps members gain access to University-funded research, facilities and expertise at the Columbia campus.

Positive Outlook

One common characteristic of GHFP members is their optimism regarding farming. Although this may seem like an odd dynamic to cite as a contributor to the group's success, it is something that is in great abundance among all members.

The group attracts optimistic people, and the positive dynamics and tangible results reinforce members' feelings of empowerment and agency. Having a positive attitude is one of several important characteristics that ensures like-mindedness within the group and permits the group to efficiently think together and operate in an effective consensus-oriented way.

Members believe in the goals and processes of the GHFP and are confident about the viability and sustainability of their own farm operations. This optimism translates into confidence that a network such as GHFP can help other farmers in similar situations. GHFP participants do not see change in terms of conquering large, insurmountable, structural constraints. Rather, they see it as a process of gaining control over their futures and as a step-by-step process of overcoming traditional ways of thinking and working.

Consensus

A process of consensus decision making is important to the GHFP's identity and success. Instead of voting or using formal procedural rules for determining group actions, the group uses consensus, or as one member put it, "we just keep talking until we're all saying basically the same thing."

The similarity of basic values within the group seems to ensure that this consensus process works well. As most members point out, if prospective members do not identify and agree with the group's philosophy and style, they usually do not join or stay with the group. Thus the exclusivity vs. harmony conundrum faced by many consensus organizations is dealt with through this process of ensuring like-mindedness.

The GHFP's relatively small size is also a contributing factor to the ability of its members to reach general agreement. Consensus clearly becomes unwieldy and less effective as organizations grow beyond a certain point. This fact, along with other factors discussed in this report, underscores the importance of practical size limits to groups such as the GHFP and the possible importance of establishing new networks if existing groups like the GHFP continue to attract new members.

Common Respect and Trust

Common trust and respect among group members provides the foundation for consensus decision making within the GHFP. The trusting relationships that have evolved over time allow members to discuss their ideas, problems, fears and mistakes in an open-minded and non-blaming environment.

It is especially important in enabling the diversity within the group to play a constructive rather than debilitating role. Members often cite the value of learning from one another's mistakes. Trust and a lack of negative competitiveness seem to be necessary for these kinds of exchanges. The trust displayed by the GHFP develops out of shared core values and from shared experiences over time. Members who might not otherwise develop personal relationships interact with one another through GHFP activities and group work projects. As a result, they develop mutual trust and respect based on personal interaction that occurs over the course of months and often years.

Philosophy of Agriculture

GHFP members share a worldview concerning the relationship of agriculture to their personal lives, families and communities. The GHFP emerged in response to members' dissatisfaction with conventional agricultural philosophy and goals, and in response to their opposition to large corporate and specialized farming, which they feel have a negative impact on communities based on smaller, diversified family farms. GHFP members view themselves as selling food to people, not commodities to a processor. In this framework, members tend to see their pasture-raised animals as specific food products oriented to niche markets, as opposed to undifferentiated commodities oriented towards a mass market. These niches are defined by members as markets that factor in the needs of farm families, communities and the environment.

Philosophy of Life and Family

GHFP members also speak about their philosophy in terms of what they call "values of quality of life and family." The group is different from many farm organizations in that husbands and wives are involved in the planning and operation of their farms and active in the group. Members talk about families in the project, not individual farmers. Children are also involved on the farm, in the group, and may be seen at many GHFP activities. Philosophically, the members talk about what they are doing as a means of spending more time with their families and trying to keep themselves and their children on the farm. The members' worldviews/philosophy are closely tied to their goals. The Holistic Resource Management ethic used by the group brings members' particular worldviews and goals into a working process through which day-to-day management decisions are made.

Change of Consciousness

Finally, understanding the process through which members develop their distinctive philosophies and worldviews concerning agriculture and the family may help in the development of other GHFP type groups. Most GHFP farmers have stories of a process of conversion to a new way of understanding and to an alternative approach to agricultural production. Conventional agriculture did not work for them or does not, in their view, work in the long-run. They tell of a stage where they were looking for agricultural alternatives. This looking stage was a prerequisite for seeking membership in the GHFP. When members first joined, they had already embarked on this change of consciousness, although many were still practicing conventional farming. While some type of heightened or changed consciousness brought most members to the GHFP, most have also indicated that they have significantly changed their farming/ranching operation since joining the group.

SECTION III

THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The various process elements discussed in this section comprise three interrelated dimensions — technology, philosophy and social organization — relevant to University roles.

TECHNOLOGY

The Forage Systems Research Center experience suggests that the best way for the University to approach farmer-network groups is through (a) understanding the practical problems facing a specific group of farmers, and (b) empowering farmers to gain more control over their livelihood. In many cases, this may mean providing research into technology that is less complex, less specialized and less expensive to purchase and repair. It may mean shaping research not to fit "universal standards" but rather tailored to farmer needs of a particular place.

Critical for success with these new technologies is not so much buying new inputs and devices; rather, it is learning a new way of thinking. With a premium placed on "using your mind instead of your pocketbook," a better term for these kinds of technologies might be Management Intensive Farming Systems.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Any effort to initiate a new GHFP type group should follow the GHFP's model of a network based on a horizontally organized exchange of knowledge. Rather than calling large meetings, University/extension researchers should develop social connections through face-to-face work with small groups and individuals. And instead of attempting to orchestrate the entire process of group formation, the University should trust farmers and others to make important network links on their own. Again, the FSRC provides a good model of the type of reciprocal relationship between researchers and farmers needed for a successful group like the GHFP.

PHILOSOPHY

The shape and the design of the GHFP is linked implicitly to members' attempts to bring about an alternative, profitable and secure way of living. This philosophy and the resulting desire for change cannot necessarily be reproduced through "changing farmer's behavior" or enacting new education programs. Rather it would seem to be created through a change of consciousness process, which in turn can be found wherever farmers are considering significant changes in their agricultural systems.

On the part of the University, this circles back to the importance of listening to farmer's problems within the context of place. GHFP members are quick to point out that their distinctive approach and use of programs such as Holistic Resource Management do not provide any easy answers. They instead emphasize the process, individual members, and other factors outlined in this report.

The GHFP illustrates the potential for collaboration with University research and extension when the latter groups are flexible and attuned to farmer and farm family needs. The notion of the University taking the lead role in replicating these groups may be problematic, for it resurrects the old development conundrum of how top-down organizations can create or develop grassroots organizations.

This case study suggests the tension between the civic activity and entrepreneurial spirit that serves as the life force of the group and the introduction of potentially beneficial outside direction and money. Fortunately, the GHFP provides a good example of a farmer network cooperating in successful partnership with the University. Following are some possible steps that the University might take in order to enhance collaboration with local farmer network organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Identification of potential cluster farmers and enhancement of newly forming networks. One of the assumptions in the goal of facilitating new farmer networks may be that there are farmers and farm families in a "looking stage" and receptive to this kind of initiative. The task of identifying these potential network members may possibly be accomplished through University sponsored activities that bring these like-minded people together and permit them to begin talking about what they are doing and what they might do. Even if the University cannot actually form alternative farmer networks and create dynamic internal networking, it may be that it can sponsor activities (e.g., seminars) and get people together in one place. As several members noted, different types of educational workshops and seminars may encourage the formation of locally organized, place-based farmer networks.

(2) Involvement of University research facilities and researchers. Another important step towards facilitating local farmer networks lies in involving University researchers in the group's activities. The successful collaboration of the GHFP and the FSRC represents a good model. It may be possible for all research stations and farms to develop similar types of cooperative ventures by forming relationships with local networks. These University centers, for example, could encourage local start-up of groups by adopting more participatory research designs and establishing a joint research agenda. Simpler measures might include providing meeting space within research buildings.

The quality and strength of research and extension depend in part on the quality and strength of local farmer group demands upon them. The FSRC, through it's grazing schools and participatory involvement with the GHFP, has created a constituency that is empowered and making demands upon the University.

(3) Enhancing farmer network use of external networks. The University can help beginning farmer networks by providing access to information and advice from other sources. Perhaps the most obvious route here would be to help new or developing groups create links with existing networks (e.g., GHFP). If established and fledgling networks had similar production interests (e.g., intensive rotational grazing), the ability to adapt knowledge to a local context would be greatly increased. There are also advantages to helping farmers link with networks and experts in neighboring states. Other ideas for increasing external networking include sponsoring meetings or workshops for farmers interested in alternative agricultural systems and local farmer networks. The kind of useful information and contacts found in these meetings might also be communicated to potential network groups through printed material and electronic list servers.

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(4) Seed monies for groups. There may be a limited role for some type of external funding for farmer networks. A University innovation fund, for example, might help foster the essential dynamics of a GHFP type organization. With a relatively small amount of money, researchers and extension specialists could organize and pay for farm tours to visit with local farmer networks and observe innovations in Missouri and neighboring states. This fund could also be used to help pay for educational workshops and seminars, teleconferencing between farmer networks, and fees for speakers that interest current and prospective farm network members.

(5) Publicize success stories. There are a number of extension and communication activities that would help popularize the concept of local farmer network organizations. Publications that explain how farmers have benefitted from intensive rotational grazing and local grazing networks not only introduce the advantages of organizations such as the GHFP to a much larger audience, but they also help to legitimize these groups, which have often operated outside the orbit of the University.

(6) Curriculum and training. The University has the opportunity to support locally organized farmer networks through teaching and training efforts that may influence both new generations of employees and agency staff already in place. More University courses could emphasize training in the technological, organizational and philosophical objectives of farmer networks. The University can also incorporate materials on alternative forms of horizontally based organizations into continuing and outreach education programs. In-Service Education offerings, short courses, and other opportunities exist for "spreading the word" about these groups to employees who might help nurture new groups or interact with established groups.

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